LISTEN
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Psalm 62:5–12
John 1:43–51
1 Samuel 3:1–10

"Now the Lord came and stood there,
calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!"
And Samuel said,
"Speak for your servant is listening."
1 Samuel 3:10 (NRSV)

There was a time when the church was very powerful,
in the time when the early Christians rejoiced
at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed.
In those days the church was not merely a thermometer
that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion;
it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.
Whenever the early Christians entered a town,
the power structure immediately sought to convict them
for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators."
But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction they were
a "colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man.
Small in number, they were big in commitment.

Martin Luther King Jr.
Letter from Birmingham Jail

There is nothing quite so compelling as a telephone ringing in the middle of the night. Nothing wakes us up, commands our full attention, as effectively as the telephone by our bedside ringing at 2:00 a.m. For parents of teenagers, physicians on call, for ministers, the phone ringing in the middle of the night mostly means someone is in trouble. It's rarely good news at 2:00 a.m. Sometimes it is a mistake; we leap into action, come fully awake in seconds, fumble with the light, answer the phone, braced for the worst, and the voice asks, "Is Ralph there?" With irritation but some relief, we respond "No, Ralph is not here at the moment. In fact, Ralph is never here. You have the wrong number," and then try to fall back to sleep.

There is nothing so compelling as a telephone ringing, a voice in the night.

Professor Paul Keim, in a commentary on the story of Eli and Samuel, says we live now in a society that is “on call” twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The omnipresent cell phone has created a whole new reality, a new set of behaviors: “cell yell,” for instance—the earnest young adult who sits down in his seat on the plane and continues talking to someone in the office, full voice, authoritatively, at a volume audible for at least five rows fore and aft; “stage phoning,” for instance, which employs “cell yell” in the airport, on the bus, in the restaurant, walking down Michigan Avenue, with no phone even visible, doing obviously very important business, making deals that can’t wait.

Cell phones ring during meetings, concerts, movies, weddings and funerals, even church. Church bulletins often include the request to please turn off your cell phone during the service. And even though we haven’t done that here, you might take this opportunity to turn yours off now. It has happened to me twice, during wedding rehearsals. The groom’s phone rang as I was going through the vows. He dug the phone out of his pocket, said “hello,” handed it to the bride—“Here. It’s for you”—and she proceeded to have an extended conversation with a caterer. The second incident was a clergy nightmare. A phone rang during rehearsal. Everybody reached for their phone, retrieved, looked, to no avail. The phone kept ringing. It was mine.

““In the midst of all this calling,” Paul Keim asks, “how do we recognize God’s voice calling us?” (*Christian Century,* 20 January 2003, pp. 22–23). It is the subject of one of our oldest and best stories, perhaps 3,000 years old. I love this story. I love its nuances and ambiguity. I love the way God calls young Samuel one, two, three, four times in the middle of the night but Samuel doesn’t know it’s God calling. I love the wonderful exchange between old Eli and young Samuel. If you have children or have been around children or ever kept a child overnight, you know that sooner or later you’re lying there sleeping and all of a sudden you’re aware that somebody is standing by your bedside. “I can’t sleep,” the child says. “I had a bad dream,” or “I think there’s a monster in the closet,” or “I heard a voice.” And you say pretty much what old Eli said: “There’s no monster. It wasn’t my voice you heard. Get a drink of water and try to go back to sleep.” And if it happened three times, who wouldn’t say what Eli said, perhaps in exasperation: “All right. Go, lie down, and if it happens again, listen; say ‘Speak, Lord, your servant is listening’”?

The story takes place back on the edge of history. Israel has barely evolved from a loose federation of tribes into a primitive nation. Eli is a priest who presides over a shrine, a sacred place where sacrifices are made, incense burned, and prayers said. Samuel’s parents, Hannah and Elkanah, are old and have given up on the possibility of children. And then Hannah, as happens elsewhere in scripture, turns up pregnant. They name their son

Samuel and, in gratitude, present him to God at Eli's shrine. Samuel becomes Eli's helper, apprentice. Eli is getting on in years, a little feeble, doesn't see very well, in fact.

There is a bigger story happening as well. Eli's sons, his priestly successors, are scoundrels, uninterested in continuing their father's work. And so part of what is going on in the old story is God choosing someone outside normal channels, an unexpected, unlikely one, a very young one, to do God's work. Samuel will become Israel's first great prophet. Samuel will anoint Israel's first king, King Saul. It's an interesting and provocative and not always comfortable insight into the way God gets the work of the kingdom done. Part of the drama of the work and ministry of Martin Luther King is that King almost always found himself working outside the normal, established channels for getting things done—the courts, legislatures, churches. Part of the enduring power of *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* is its indictment of the established church's timidity and open hostility to King and the dream of equality and justice. The letter he wrote from his jail cell was addressed to the white clergy of Birmingham who had publicly asked him to stop pushing so hard for voters' rights and equal access and an end to segregation. The letter is a masterpiece, an American classic. He reminded his brother clergy that the early Christians were called "outside agitators" when they protested the Roman practice of infanticide; "disturbers of the peace" when they breached barriers of gender and class, rich and poor, slave and free. God, this old story suggests, first tries the appropriate channels to get things done, and if it doesn't work, if people won't listen, God goes outside, chooses a young Samuel, a young prophet by the name of Martin Luther King Jr., to overturn two centuries of injustice in this nation. If the politicians and the church won't attend to the matter of poverty, which is the one consistent priority for God from the beginning to the end of the Bible, if the politicians and preachers won't listen to God on the topic of the grotesque and growing gap between rich and poor in our nation and the enormous gap between rich and poor nations in the world, God doesn't give up. God uses a rock star named Bono to get something done no politician or preacher has succeeded in doing, namely getting Republicans and Democrats to do something about the crushing economic burden of Third World debt.

"Listen," old Eli told Samuel. "Be quiet, stop fussing, stop talking so much, and listen."

Hugh T. Kerr, longtime editor of *Theology Today*, wrote an essay, "Whatever Happened to Dialogue," in the midst of the noise and controversy and confrontation and conflict of the Vietnam War. Kerr observed that our problem is that so many of us don't want to communicate in the first place. "Dialogue is difficult because opposing factions stop listening and tune each other out. . . . Conversation ends in a shouting

match. . . . Fewer and fewer are in the mood for listening and hearing." Dialogue is difficult because we are "radicalized, politicized, Balkanized, polarized" (*Our Life in God's Light*, p. 137).

That was thirty years ago, long before Hardball and Talk Radio and Bill O'Reilly and Rush Limbaugh hurling verbal hand grenades; red state, blue state; long before the take-no prisoners, no-compromise style of politics.

The greatest gift we can give to another person is to attend to her, attend to him, pay attention, listen. The greatest gift we can give to another is to listen—to really listen, listen with full attention—without interruption. It is a gift that holds within it the possibility of healing, redemption. And it operates between husbands and wives, partners and lovers and dear friends. Listen. It operates in the workplace, between colleagues, supervisors and supervisees, bosses and employees. It operates over coffee or shared meals. It is particularly important in meetings when the topic of discussion is controversial and people have different opinions and come to different conclusions. Listen. It is important in the most intimate of relationships. Listen. Stop talking and listen. Stop, for a moment, pursuing your agenda and listen to the agenda, the hopes, needs, hungers, dreams, grief, joys of the other, particularly the one you most passionately love. Set aside your self for a moment so another self has room and freedom to be.

Everybody needs someone who will listen, who will say you are important enough to me that I will set aside my agenda for a moment in order to attend to yours. They used to require courses in seminary that were known affectionately as "Shut Up and Listen" courses. A minister's natural instinct is to talk and keep talking, to explain, argue, convince, dispense advice. Most of us need to learn that what people need from us is not more talk, not even advice, but an opportunity to be heard. Good physicians know that and spend important time asking and listening. Psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors know the therapeutic value of simply listening.

Would the world not be a better place if nations listened to one another, if instead of Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* we engaged in a conversation of civilizations? Would the world not be a far better and peaceful place if religions listened to one another, if Christians listened to Muslims and Jews and Hindus instead of convicting and condemning and converting? Would not the church of Jesus Christ be a more healthy and compelling place if we stopped shouting and arguing and started listening?

In the 1930s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor, theologian, took his stand publicly in opposition to Hitler and the rise of the Nazis in Germany. He was, as you know, martyred at the end of the war for his part in the attempt to assassinate Hitler. In the '30s, Bonhoeffer organized an underground seminary at Finkenwald for theological students who shared

his commitment to resist the Nazis. For obvious reasons the students lived in a close, tight-knit, almost secretive, community—not an easy situation in any circumstance. The health of the community was literally a matter of life and death. Out of the experience Bonhoeffer wrote a remarkable little book, *Life Together*. One of the sections is entitled "The Ministry of Listening."

So listen to Bonhoeffer:

> The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening. Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren [they were all men in the seminary] is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that he not only gives us his Word but also lends us his ear.

Bonhoeffer notes that "Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others —they forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking" (p. 98).

It was maybe the smartest thing the old priest Eli ever said, the best priestly advice he ever gave: Listen. I love this story because I believe God does call you and me. I believe the voice of God comes to us—in the world, for instance, in the beauty of a sunset, the power of a storm, a newborn's cry, telling us that creation is good and holy and a gift given to us new every morning, calling us to gratitude and praise. And I believe God calls us in the voice of others, the poor, the oppressed, the vulnerable and marginalized, the children—the voice of God summoning us to be faithful and obedient, kind and just, compassionate and generous. And I believe God speaks to us in great art and beautiful music and noble causes like Civil Rights, like peace, like an end to hunger, like education and opportunity for all the children, like an end to torture by every nation, including our own—causes that tug at our hearts and consciences and love and summon us to get up and do something, that summon us to participate and sacrifice.

And as a Christian, I believe that God spoke and continues to speak to us through Jesus Christ, God's Word made flesh, God's word to us, spoken clearly, eloquently, and powerfully in Jesus, in his birth and life and teaching, his kindness and compassion, his inclusive, unconditional love for all humankind; that in him God speaks to you and me and calls us to be his faithful disciples.

I love the story of Samuel and Eli because the voice is not immediately recognizable as God. I love the story because it takes God four times to get through to Samuel. It's true for most of us, I think. We envy those who have heard God speak in such a clear, clarion voice that they know exactly what's on God's mind, what God thinks about this or that, what God wants them to do with their life. But it's not the way it is for most of us.

When you decide you want to be a Presbyterian minister, you have to go to your Presbytery, an assembly of a hundred ministers and elders representing all the Presbyterian churches in the area, for an examination—several in fact. At the first one, the Presbytery wants you to explain your sense of call: “Tell us how it is that you know yourself called to ministry.” I dreaded the moment. I wasn’t sure how to answer. To make matters worse, there were two of us that day, and the other candidate nearly leapt to his feet when the call question came and literally knocked it out of the park with a description of a dramatic personal experience in which he heard and knew without the shadow of a doubt that God wanted him to be Presbyterian minister and go to Princeton Seminary. “What about you, John; how do you know yourself called?” Well, I fumbled and bumbled and hemmed and hawed and mumbled something about liking people and wanting to be helpful and being interested in Jesus and having a lot of questions about God. I’m not sure why, but they voted us both in—me, I’m sure, on his coattails.

I’ve thought a lot about that and have concluded that maybe that’s how God calls us—through other people, through our sense that we are here not for our own amusement but to do God’s work, to make the place a little better, a little easier for the challenged, a little more gentle and kind and hospitable. I’ve concluded that maybe it’s God calling when we can’t sleep at night because our conscience is bothering us or we find ourselves worrying about injustice or the war or the starving children. And I’ve concluded that maybe God calls us through the questions we ask and struggle over, that maybe God wants us to be open to new thoughts and to be brave enough to be in a lifelong search for truth and beauty. And I’ve concluded that God does speak to us deeply through that man we can’t seem to forget or ignore, that compelling man Jesus, who was, in fact, the Word made flesh. God’s word to us.

In George Bernard Shaw’s play on the life of Joan of Arc, there is a scene in which the archbishop and King Charles are interrogating Joan of Arc.

> The archbishop asks, “How do you know you are right?”
>
> Joan answers, “My voices.”
>
> The king interrupts: “Oh your voices, your voices. Why don’t the voices come to me, I’m the king, not you.”
>
> Joan responds: “They do come but you do not hear them.”

It’s an important word that Eli says to Samuel: *Listen.*

Amen